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League of nations

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League of Nations

(For K. Dowding (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Power*, London, Sage, 2011)

Founded in 1920 and formally wound-up in 1946, the League of Nations was established to promote international cooperation and achieve international peace and security. Members of the League pledged themselves not to resort to war, to respect international law, and to maintain scrupulous respect for treaty obligations. In the 1930s certain members of the League, notably Japan, Italy and Germany, flagrantly violated these pledges, and when their actions met with a weak and disunited response, the role of the League in the maintenance of peace and security effectively ended. No League action was taken against Germany when it remilitarised the Rhineland in violation of its treaty obligations in 1936.

Previously the principal League members had dragged their feet when responding to Japanese aggression in Manchuria. They also proved divided on how to respond to Mussolini's seizure of Abyssinia. Economic sanctions were imposed in the latter case, but half-heartedly. France, in particular, was not prepared to risk the alienation of Italy in light of its broader strategy of containing the rising power of Germany. For these reasons the name of the League quickly became associated with impotence.

The League is generally viewed as a unitary body designed to promote collective security. In reality it was neither. From the onset of negotiations in 1919, the victorious Allied and Associated Powers held different conceptions of the kind of body they wanted the League to be. The driving force behind the idea, President Wilson, conceived the League as an antidote to the secret diplomacy and *realpolitik* of the pre-War years. Conference diplomacy and strict adherence to the principle of non-aggression would replace the balance of power that had led to World War One. France, however, saw the League as a ballwark against Germany and bastion of the 1919 territorial and political *status quo*. Britain, contrastingly, conceived the League as a means of peaceful change and of

controlling costly arms races. Uppermost in British thinking was the need to reduce the costs of maintaining an extensive empire, and to provide a means of peaceably altering a European *status quo* that a disadvantaged Germany would not accept indefinitely.

The League comprised a Council, an Assembly, a Secretariat, a Mandates Commission, an International Labour Office, and a range of specialist committees on e.g. refugees, narcotics, the slave trade, national minorities, the control of contagious diseases, and intellectual cooperation. Institutionally, therefore, the League was a complex organisation, far from the unitary actor of popular imagination. Similarly, the description of the League as a collective security organisation is misleading since its Covenant imposed no obligation on member-states to automatically apply military sanctions against an aggressor. The term 'collectively security' does not appear in the Covenant.

Wilson wished to reduce the power of the independent nation-state and reduce its capacity, and need, to act unilaterally. For quite different purposes, Clemenceau wanted the League to have a strong supranational component, including its own armed forces. Neither conception prevailed, however, and the independent power of the nation-state remained intact. Wilson placed huge faith in the power of public opinion and, fortified by the effectiveness of the wartime blockade, economic power to bring aggressors to their senses. International public opinion, however, proved no more capable of being forged into a unity than the various governments. Economic power proved enormously difficult to organise, especially following the onset of the Great Depression.

According to some, the failure of the US Senate to ratify the Versailles Treaty, thereby blocking the entry of the US into the League, fatally wounded the institution at the outset. Yet the League went on to achieve considerable successes in the economic, social and humanitarian fields, often with

American cooperation. The great lesson of the League is the difficulty of controlling the independent power of the nation-state.

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See also: balance of power; collective security; diplomacy; economic power in international relations; United Nations.

Further Reading

Northedge, F.S. (1986). *The League of Nations: Its Life and Times, 1920-1946*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.

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